

THE TRANSMISSION OF ASTROLOGY IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

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It is extremely dangerous for a medievalist to step forward an inch without trailing a coat of manuscripts; but I have nothing textual here to add to the corpus of known early medieval astrological manuscripts. I propose instead to explore the effect of certain pressures upon the history of learning: pressures which, while they have a bearing upon that which we can learn from its transmitted texts, are best and most clearly seen, in truth, in separation from these last. It will be my contention that certain sorts of pressure (competitive, hierarchical, and, dare I say it, emotional pressures within the nascent European Christian Church) have more to tell us about transmission than we have been inclined to realize, and that these pressures may be made out with a peculiar distinctness in the early history of astrology.

Astrology is useful as a test case for three reasons. Firstly, though there are still some tantalizing conundrums, and doubtless many discoveries still to be made, we seem to have a good idea of the textual outline of the early medieval astrological corpus. We might permit ourselves now, therefore, to look a little beyond it. Secondly, there is much about the shape of this present outline which is inadequately accounted for. Gaps and bulges in bodies of medieval texts tend often to be explained by chance—something lost, something found—a method of explanation which reinforces the notion that learned persons in the Middle Ages were a species of intellectual scavenger, forever avidly on the watch for whatever scrap or fragment of ancient culture they might find among the ruins of antiquity, and delighted, once found, to seize upon it. Assumptions of this kind are incorporated, almost unconsciously, into many histories of medieval astrology and science. They need correction, and can perhaps here be corrected. Thirdly, once the pressures of which I have spoken are examined a little more closely, it may be possible to turn back to the codices and to throw a little further light upon the makeup and development of the textual corpus itself.

This paper, then, will follow three different, though I hope converging, paths. Firstly, I shall recall that which I take to be the broad outlines of the textual transmission of astrology. These broad outlines conceal certain inner complexities,

This paper was written with the help of a Davis fellowship at Princeton University, and a version of it was delivered at the Colloquium on the Transmission of Culture in the Middle Ages, held at the Davis Center in 1987. A second (amended) version was then given that same year at the Conference of Historians of British History at Albany, New York. Each occasion produced comments and discussion to which this third version is greatly indebted.